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Message Text

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ACTION EUR-12

INFO OCT-01 ISO-00 CIAE-00 DODE-00 PM-05 H-02 INR-10
L-03 NSAE-00 NSC-05 PA-02 SP-02 SS-15 USIA-15
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----------109107 211930Z /50
R 211713Z FEB 78
FM AMCONSUL BELFAST
TO SECSTATE WASHDC 1860
INFO AMEMBASSY DUBLIN
AMEMBASSY LONDON

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E.O. 11652: N/A
TAGS: PINS, UK, EI, PINT
SUBJECT: NORTHERN IRELAND: TERRORISTS' SPECTACULAR MASSACRE

1. SUMMARY. THE PROVISIONAL IRA FEBRUARY 17 PULLED OFF A SPECTACULAR MASSACRE OF NI INNOCENTS -- ONE OF THE WORST DURING THE TROUBLES. AS WORLD MEDIA HAVE REPORTED, 12 PEOPLE WERE BURNED TO DEATH AND ANOTHER 30 INJURED AS THE RESULT OF A FIRE BOMB PLACED ON THE WINDOW OF A CROWDED RESTAURANT. PIRA ADMITTED ERROR IN NOT GIVING ENOUGH WARNING TIME, BUT THE ADMISSION DOES NOT DIMINISH THE REVULSION AGAINST PIRA, WHICH CONTINUES ITS OFFENSIVE ACTIONS IN NI. THE GOVERNMENT ALSO IS WIDELY CRITICIZED HERE. GOVERNMENT AND PRIVATE LEADERS HAVE CALLED FOR RESTRAINT IN REACTION AGAINST PIRA. THE AIM IS TO KEEP ANTI-PIRA ACTION LEGAL AND TO PREVENT COUNTER-TERRORISM BY LOYALIST PARAMILITARIES. END SUMMARY.

2. JUST BEFORE NINE O' CLOCK THE EVENING OF FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 17, A SMALL BLAST BOMB PACKAGED WITH GASOLINE CONTAINERS WENT OFF ON A WINDOW OF THE LA MON HOUSE RESTAURANT NEAR COMBER -- A SUBURBAN TOWN A FEW MILES SOUTH OF BELFAST IN SOLIDLY PROTESTANT TERRITORY. ON THE OTHER SIDE OF WINDOW SOME 40 MEMBERS OF THE IRISH COLLIE DOG CLUB WERE FINISHING DINNER
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IN A DINING ROOM, WHICH TURNED INTO AN INFERNO. TWELVE DIED, THEIR REMAINS SO CHARRED THAT AS OF DRAFTING SIX BODIES STILL HAD NOT BEEN POSITIVELY IDENTIFIED. DOG PAWS WERE FOUND IN THE DEBRIS. ANOTHER 400-500 PEOPLE OF A MOTORCYCLE CLUB WERE IN THE ADJOINING BANQUET HALL, WHICH WAS RAZED. ALL TOLD SOME 30 PEOPLE WERE INJURED.

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3. THE PROVISIONAL IRA NORMALLY WARNS OF IMPENDING EXPLOSIONS, SO PEOPLE CAN GET AWAY. IN THIS CASE THE GENERAL POST OFFICE RECEIVED A PIRA WARNING CALL, AND IMMEDIATELY PHONED POLICE HEADQUARTERS, WHICH DESPATCHED A RADIO CAR TO THE RESTAURANT AND PHONED AHEAD. THE EXPLOSION HAD ALREADY OCCURRED. THE NEXT DAY PIRA SAID THE MATTER WAS BEING INVESTIGATED, AND ON FEBRUARY 19 IT RELEASED A STATEMENT ADMITTING RESPONSIBILITY. IT CLAIMED THAT THE POLICE HAD BEEN GIVEN A NINE-MINUTE WARNING, WHICH "WAS PROVED TOTALLY INADEQUATE GIVEN THE DISASTROUS CONSEQUENCES." BUT THE STATEMENT ACCEPTED "CONDEMNATION AND CRITICISM" ONLY FROM THE RELATIVES AND FRIENDS OF THOSE KILLED, AND FROM SUPPORTERS. "ALL KILLINGS AND TRAGEDIES STEM FROM BRITISH INTERFERENCE." PROVISIONAL SINN FEIN (PIRA'S POLITICAL ASSOCIATE) IN DUBLIN REPORTEDLY ANNOUNCED FEBRUARY 20 THAT THE ACTION HAD BEEN CONTRARY "TO THE STATED POLICY OF THE IRA."

4. REACTION: POLICE QUICKLY ROUNDED UP SOME 20 PEOPLE, INCLUDING SOME SENIOR SINN FEIN LEADERS. THEY ALSO HANDED OUT A CIRCULAR WITH A SHOCKING PHOTO OF A CHARRED BODY, WHICH WAS INTENDED TO GET INFORMATION (COPIES POUCHED TO ADDRESSEES). REVULSION AND CONDEMNATION OF THE PIRA WAS GENERAL IN NORTHERN IRELAND AND ELSEWHERE. POPE PAUL AND IRISH PRIME MINISTER LYNCH SPOKE STRONGLY. A PARTICULARLY TELLING COMMENT WAS MADE BY CATHOLIC SDLP MP GERRY FITT, WHO APPEALED TO ALL TO INFORM POLICE OF THE IDENTITY OF THE "DEPRAVED ANIMALS"
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RESPONSIBLE. EDITORIAL COMMENT IN BELFAST PAPERS WAS HARSH, AND PAPERS REPORTED POLICE UNHAPPINESS WITH THE CONDUCT OF ANTI-TERRORIST OPERATIONS. MANY LOYALIST POLITICIANS CALLED FOR HARSHER MEASURES AGAINST TERRORISTS -- PARTICULARLY THE REINTRODUCTION OF THE DEATH PENALTY AND OF PREVENTIVE DETENTION.

5. SECRETARY OF STATE ROY MASON ASKED FOR RESTRAINT, AND TO KEEP REACTION WITHIN THE RULE OF LAW. HE RULED OUT A CHANGE TOWWARD A HARSHER POLICY. OBVIOUSLY MASON FEARED COUNTER ACTION BY THE LOYALIST PARAMILITARIES, WHO ARE GENERALLY BELIEVED RESPONSIBLE FOR RECENT MURDER ATTEMPTS AGAINST TWO VETERAN PROVISIONALS. PROTESTANT CLERGYMEN REPORTEDLY WERE WORKING BEHIND THE SCENES TO DISSUADE THEM FROM VIOLENCE, AND SIGNIFICANTLY, REV. IAN PAISLEY PUBLICLY ASKED FOR RESTRAINT AND NO RETALIATION.

6. PIRA MOTIVATION: IT IS CREDIBLE THAT PIRA DID NOT INTEND THE HOLOCAUST IT CAUSED (IT HAS ITS OWN WAYS OF DISCIPLINING MEMBERS WHO ERR). BUT EVEN IF ADEQUATE WARNING HAD BEEN GIVEN, THE ATTACK WOULD HAVE BEEN SPECTACULAR AND THE RISK TO INNOCENTS GREAT. VIOLENT DISRUPTION OF A

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FRIDAY-NIGHT DINNER-DANCE OF SEVERAL HUNDRED PEOPLE, MOSTLY
PROTESTANTS, WITH THE INEVITABLE PROSPECT OF TRAGEDY. OUTSIDERS
CANNOT ALWAYS DIVINE THE PIRA THOUGHT PROCESS, BUT THE FOLLOWING
FACTORS MAY BE PART OF THE EQUATION:
(1) IN A SOPHISTICATED ANALYSIS FEBRUARY 19, THE "SUNDAY
TIMES" POSITED TWO MOTIVES: THE FIRST TARGET WAS LYNCH'S
SCHEDULED MAJOR SPEECH FEBRUARY 18 TO A FIANNA FAIL
MEETING: PIRA'S MESSAGE WAS THAT THE MEN REALLY FIGHTING
FOR IRISH UNITY ARE NOT FIANNA FAIL OR THE IRISH GOVERNMENT,
BUT PIRA.
(2) THE "TIMES" SECOND TARGET WAS SECRETARY MASON:
DESPITE HIS OPTIMISTIC STATEMENTS OF RECENT MONTHS, PIRA
SHOWED IT WAS ALIVE AND CAPABLE OF COMMITTING TERRIBLE INJURY
ON THE NI COMMUNITY.
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(3) THE "GUARDIAN" FEBRUARY 20 ADDED AS AN EXPLANATION
PIRA'S DESIRE TO WREAK AS MUCH SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC HAVOC
AS POSSIBLE, IN THE HOPE OF PROVOKING "A SECTARIAN STRUGGLE
OF CIVIL PROPORTIONS" AND BRINGING ABOUT THE COLLAPSE THAT
HAS SO FAR EVADED IT.

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(4) LESS IMPORTANTLY AND PERHAPS COINCIDENTALLY, PIRA ALSO
CHALLENGED THE PEACE MOVEMENT, WHICH WAS SCHEDULED TO PROTEST
PIRA VIOLENCE FEBRUARY 18 IN FRONT OF THE PROVISIONAL SINN

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FEIN HEADQUARTERS IN DUBLIN.

7. JUDGING FROM THE REACTION, PEOPLE WILL BE LESS INCLINED TO GO TO PLACES OF PUBLIC ENTERTAINMENT FOR A WHILE, WHICH IS A PLUS FOR PIRA. LOYALIST PARAMILITARIES MAY BE MORE INCLINED TOWARD ACTION AGAINST THE CATHOLIC COMMUNITY. AND THERE WILL BE LOYALIST PRESSURES ON SECRETARY MASON PERSONALLY, AND TO TAKE TOUGHER MEASURES AGAINST THE PIRA. REVULSION AGAINST THIS VIOLENCE, HOWEVER, MAY ALSO STRENGTHEN THOSE WHO OPPOSE VIOLENCE OF ANY KIND.

8. PIRA CAMPAIGN CONTINUES: THE LA MON MASSACRE OVERSHADOWED WHAT BY NOW ONE MAY CONSIDER NORMAL TERRORIST ACTION, INCLUDED TWO OTHER NOTEWORTHY EVENTS:
(1) AN ARMY HELICOPTER CRASHED IN SOUTH ARMAGH FEBRUARY 17, KILLING THE LIEUTENANT COLONEL COMMANDING THE LOCAL BATTALION. THERE WERE SEVERAL SHOOTING INCIDENTS IN THAT AREA DURING THE DAY, IN KEEPING WITH AN INCREASE IN PIRA ACTIVITY SINCE THE NEW YEAR, AND PIRA CLAIMED A KILL. THE ARMY SAYS ITS INVESTIGATION OF THE CRASH IS NOT CONCLUDED.
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IT DOES NOT EXCLUDE THE POSSIBILITY PIRA IS CORRECT, BUT NO BULLET TRACES HAVE BEEN FOUND YET.
(2) ON FEBRUARY 19 SIX ARMED MEN PLANTED BOMBS AMONG LONDONDERRY'S BUS FLEET. 36 OF THE 60 BUSES WERE PUT OUT OF COMMISSION -- 17 COMPLETELY DESTROYED. BUSES CLASSICALLY HAVE BEEN TERRORIST TARGETS, BUT THIS WAS THE BIGGEST COUP YET.

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